A Theory on Danger Frames

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“People react to fear, not love; they don’t teach that in Sunday School, but it’s true.”

Richard Nixon

**Introduction**

Fear tactics are commonly used in political speech to influence mass opinion. The objective behind this strategy is to convince the public that choosing the opposing policy or candidate will have dangerous consequences. The fact politicians and other elites try to create fear toward their opponents is not a new discovery, and conventional wisdom holds that fear tactics are effective. However, modern political science has not sufficiently tested this commonly held belief nor has it thoroughly explained the process by which fear tactics influence political attitudes.

In this paper, I present a theory on the effect of fear tactics on individual-level opinion formation based on frame theory (e.g. Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997) and the literature on neurological information processing (e.g. LeDoux 2000). These literatures suggest that we are biologically more susceptible to messages that are cloaked in danger, or what I term “danger frames.” I propose that danger frames make us more vulnerable to persuasion because they privilege the information they carry in an individual’s decision-making process.

This project is motivated by my interest in elite-mass communication and questions regarding elite influence on public opinion, and has implications for democratic theory to the extent that it suggests citizens can be manipulated by political leaders. It expands frame theory in that it explores the relationship between affect and issue frames, and presents a specific theory on frames that are designed to evoke fear and anxiety. My project also incorporates the growing body of research on the brain’s neurological information processing systems into the field of political science through its explanations of decision-making.

I begin this discussion with an overview of fear tactics in political communication before reviewing the neurological research that underlies my theory on danger frames. Next, I describe frame theory and the extant literature on issue framing and emotions, and then I introduce danger frame theory. Finally I briefly discuss political psychology’s approach to emotion and political judgment as segue to an overview of the affective intelligence model (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen 2000), which seems to contradict danger frame theory. My subsequent analysis points out that danger frame theory is not only consistent with the affective intelligence model, but that it is supported by tests of the affective intelligence model’s predictions.

**Literature Review**

Fear Tactics in Political Communication

Danger and warnings of threat are common themes in political speech. Campaign advertisements warn us that if we vote for the wrong candidate, there will be dire consequences. Elected officials make statements on news shows that warn us of the opposing party’s dangerous policies. Interest groups and editorials publish information warning us that society—possibly the world—is on the verge of collapse if the status quo is not changed.

Perhaps the most iconic political advertisement that employed fear tactics was that produced by President Lyndon B. Johnson’s reelection campaign in 1964, referred to as the “Daisy Spot.” The ad begins with an image of a little girl in a field picking petals from a daisy, but then morphs into an official-sounding countdown for a rocket launch followed by the image of a nuclear explosion (Museum of the Moving Image). Looking at it today, the ad may not seem very threatening—it is in black and white and the videotape is grainy—but in the midst of the Cold War, it was seen as so fear provoking and controversial that Johnson’s campaign removed the ad from television after just one airing.

Despite the controversy associated with the Daisy Spot, the use of fear tactics is quite a common political strategy to this day. A recent example can be found in an evocative advertisement in support of Alan Grayson’s (D, FL) reelection campaign for the U.S. House Representatives. Grayson’s campaign implied that his opponent, Dan Webster, would put central Florida’s female citizens in a position comparable to those under Taliban authority in Afghanistan through a television ad that repeatedly projected a clip of Webster speaking the phrase, “submit to me” as his image grew larger and larger (Condon 2010).

Political elites use fear tactics to shape mass political behavior. Their objectives may be to encourage people to support and vote for a particular candidate, to call or write a letter to an elected official, or to simply recycle their trash.[[1]](#footnote-1) These warnings are designed to stimulate an urgent and negative reaction to some political action or object.

Are these fear tactics effective? Surprisingly, there is little empirical research in political science on this specific question. The body of literature on negative campaigning often subsumes fear tactics into its research, but a focused examination of the effectiveness of fear cues is difficult to find (exceptions include Brader 2005, which is discussed further in this paper). Most published tests on the impact of fear tactics is found in communications research on behavior changes related to public health campaigns (e.g. Witte & Allen 2000) or social psychology’s research on in-group/out-group relations (e.g. Cottrell & Neuberg 2007).[[2]](#footnote-2) While meta-analysis of this literature suggests that fear tactics can influence people (Witte & Allen 2000), it is important that political science examine this question with regard to political communication.

My project is meant to address this gap in the political science literature by examining physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions to fear tactics. The next section of this paper reviews neurological research findings and frame theory, the two literatures that underlie my theory on the effectiveness of fear tactics, or danger frames.

Neurological Research

Advances in neurological research technology, such as the use of functional MRI, have allowed scientists to non-invasively examine how the human brain responds physiologically to various stimuli. A good deal of that research centers on fear conditioning, how the brain is conditioned to respond in a fearful manner to stimuli that are not inherently dangerous. Below, I provide a highly simplified summary of some of the neurological processes revealed by this body of research.

Most of the research on fear conditioning centers on the structures linked to the amygdala, which is a walnut-sized structure near the center of the human brain that manages one’s response to danger. Information about a stimulus enters the brain through the body’s senses (e.g. sight, sound) and travels directly to the amygdala. The amygdala, in turn, is connected to other regions of the brain that might tell the amygdala that the stimulus is not dangerous, or may encourage a fearful response depending on past experience and other evaluations of the incoming information. Thus, fear is tempered by automatic and conscious systems through different structures in the brain working together. These different parts of the brain work together to produce a fine tuned response to stimuli (Phelps 2009).

One of the structures of the brain that communicates with the amygdala is the hippocampus, which is the locus of long-term memory. The amygdala “consults” with the hippocampus to help determine if past experience with an object suggests that a fearful reaction is appropriate. But communication between these two structures is bidirectional. Information coming into the brain and encoded into the hippocampus is affected by whether the amygdala determines that the stimuli is dangerous. When fear is aroused, the information being received is stored within the hippocampus in a manner that makes it salient and enduring (Phelps 2004). This process makes sense because we are evolutionarily advantaged if our brains create strong memories about dangerous objects or events.

Researchers have discovered that people can be conditioned to respond fearfully to an object through verbal communication (e.g. Phelps et al, 2001) as well as observation and direct experience. In other words, we do not need to personally experience a negative consequence to become fearful of a stimulus; being warned that the stimulus will cause harm is enough to make us respond to it fearfully. Neurological research also reveals that people can respond to conditioned stimuli even before they are consciously aware of the stimuli , especially if the stimuli are “biologically privileged” in their ability to induce a fear response (Ohman 2009, 141). This means that information can travel to the amygdala and create a response before we are conscious that the danger exists. Most people have experienced this reaction at some point in their lives such as when they jump away from an object they see in their peripheral vision (e.g. a twig that looks like a snake, a speck of dust that resembles a spider) before they have had time to evaluate exactly what they saw.

Since the amygdala responds similarly to instructed conditioning as it would when we have direct experience with the harmful effects of an object (Phelps et al, 2001), there is good reason to hypothesize that political information designed to arouse fear and anxiety would also be stored in the hippocampus in a strong and enduring manner. As such, information communicated via fear tactics could hold a privileged position within our brains. My project examines if this supposition is correct.

I study questions about how the use of fear tactics in elite to mass communication influences opinion formation through the lens of frame theory. Frame theory allows me to break down the way a warning of danger is communicated so I can study the particular aspects of the message that may influence attitudes and behavior. Also, framing research has developed a standard set of methodological tools for analyzing the effect of warning messages that is useful for my research.

Frame Theory

Political science describes framing as the practice of emphasizing certain aspects of an issue or object so as to influence how message recipients perceive and judge the issue. Most issues, even relatively straightforward matters, can be considered from different perspectives. Framing encourages people to consider an issue from a particular perspective, giving it priority in the recipient’s mind over other possible perspectives (e.g. Nelson, Oxley & Clawson 1997).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Threat, or the expected probability of danger, is a potential frame for most any issue debated in the public arena because most political issues concern a competition between potential losers and potential winners. A danger frame is applied to an issue in political communication by highlighting and emphasizing the manner in which people may suffer negative consequences depending on the outcome of the debate in such a way as to encourage a fear response.

For example, Johnson’s Daisy Spot, mentioned above, was designed to create an association between the potential election of Barry Goldwater as President and a horrific consequence. The juxtaposition of a young, innocent girl with the launching and explosion of a nuclear bomb was meant to highlight the risk associated with Goldwater (though Goldwater’s name was never mentioned in the ad) as well as to create a sense of fear within the viewer. In terms of framing, the Daisy Spot attempted to make Goldwaters’ “dangerousness” a strong consideration among voters to the exclusion of other factors that might impact judgment about that candidate.

The Willie Horton advertisement sponsored by, then, Vice-President George H. Bush’s 1988 Presidential campaign is another example of the use of danger frames (see Museum of the Moving Image). This advertisement was designed to frame Michael Dukakis as dangerous candidate by highlighting a heinous crime that occurred under a prisoner furlough program he supported while Governor of Massachusetts. An even more recent example is the “3:00 a.m. Phone Call” advertisement used by Hillary Clinton’s campaign in the 2008 Democratic race for Presidential nominee (see YouTube). Featuring the sound of a ringing phone amidst the faces of sleeping children, the ad highlighted the risk associated with Obama due to his inexperience with international issues. In both of these examples, the advertisements’ goals were to create a sense of fear and to make the risk of danger associated with a vote for the targeted candidates a strong consideration in the public’s voting decisions.

There are many techniques available for framing political messages. The frame may be apparent in the text of the message or it can be subtler such as when the frame is communicated through visual elements of a message. One common example of the latter can be found in negative advertisements that project unflattering or black and white images of an opponent while presenting attractive, dignified, colorful images of the candidate they promote. Another way to frame a message is with sound such as music that indicates a particular tone (e.g. doom, patriotism).

Consider the framing techniques used in the campaign advertisements described earlier. In Johnson’s Daisy Spot and the Willie Horton ad, the danger frame is communicated primarily through visual means. Both ads present frightening images, one of a vulnerable child threatened by a nuclear explosion, the other with imposing images of a Black man with long hair and an untrimmed beard.

These ads used more than visual framing techniques, however. The Daisy Spot used an auditory frame in its juxtaposition of the sound of the little girl counting that transitioned to the sound of a loud, harsh countdown for a (presumably) nuclear rocket launch. Another frame used in the Willie Horton ad was textual, as illustrated in the projection—one at time—of the words “kidnapping,” “stabbing,” and “raping” under the image of Horton. These words evoke thoughts of imminent, life-threatening danger and a sense of fear and anxiety among other emotions.

Framing & Affect

There is not a great deal of research in the framing literature on the role of affect in the framing effect. Most framing studies examine how people respond to frames presented in text that highlights a particular consideration or perspective on an issue. Some studies acknowledge that frames can trigger emotions, but rarely is affect the subject of framing research.

Exceptions include the work of Gross and colleagues (2004, 2008), and Aaroe (2009).[[4]](#footnote-4) Gross and D’Ambrosio (2004) performed an experiment to examine how frames can alter emotional response. Referencing cognitive appraisal theory (discussed later in this paper), the authors hypothesized that the use of different frames on the same information will lead to different emotional responses due to variations in assessments of the subject matter. “Just as frames alter the accessibility or importance of various considerations brought to bear in formulating opinion, they also alter the considerations available when formulating emotional response.” (p. 3) Gross and D’Ambrosio exposed subjects to dispositional and situational causal attribution frames in fictional news reports on the LA riots of 1992 and observed subjects’ emotional responses. While the responses of the treatment groups did not vary much from the control group, the researchers found interactions between frames and predispositions that varied by frame. They also examined the “content” of emotional reactions (subjects’ explanations of their emotional reactions) and noted that the content varied according to frame.

Gross (2008) examined episodic and thematic frames in persuasive appeals and the role that emotion plays in those framing effects. She specifically studied whether episodic framed stories designed to induce pity and sympathy were more persuasive at getting experiment subjects to oppose mandatory sentencing than was a thematic framed story. She found that thematic frames were more persuasive, but that episodic frames caused more of an emotional reaction, and concluded that frames may have influence via a cognitive route and via an affective route.

Aaroe (2009) performed an interesting study that examined the relative strength of thematic and episodic frames in terms of the impact of emotional response to frames. She hypothesized that episodic frames would arouse more emotion than did thematic frames because the former highlights the plight of an individual with whom subjects might empathize. She also predicted that the episodic frames would have greater influence on attitude and that the thematic frames would be more influential where there was less emotional arousal. Experimental testing of these hypotheses supported her predictions.

The research on framing and affect consistently indicates that frame strength is shaped not just by the frame’s impact on the cognitive process, but also on how people react emotionally to frames. These studies also suggest that the arousal of affect has a distinct impact on judgment separate from cognitive evaluations. These findings parallel with neurological research that indicates that our brains process information via two routes, one affective and the other cognitive.

The distinction between routes of information processing is significant because it suggests that affect can impact judgment independent of cognition. Research indicates that stimuli received by the brain are processed via two different routes. The faster route goes directly to the amygdala and produces a response before we even become consciously aware of the stimuli. The second, slower, route travels to conscious processing regions of the brain where we may thoughtfully evaluate the information we receive (Buchel & Dolan 2000). Gross’ (2004; 2008) and Aaroe’s (2009) findings suggest that frames can influence affect and attitude without conscious processing of the message or the frame. I will return to this matter later.

Gross and Aaroe examined what types of frames are more likely to arouse emotion. My project varies from theirs in that I examine how direct appeals to emotion in the form of danger frames impact judgment. To approach this question, I found it useful to develop a theory on danger frames.

**A Theory on Danger Frames**

Fear tactics operate by placing danger frames on political information. Similar to most types of frames, danger frames operate by changing how people weigh information. Danger frames are distinct from most frames in that they operate primarily by manipulating affect, which influences individual decision-making.[[5]](#footnote-5) The arousal of fear through framing techniques makes the information communicated in the message privileged in that it becomes a more salient and enduring consideration within one’s mind. In such instances, it is not just the information but also the manner in which the information is provided that influences the attitudinal response.

This theory is based upon the neurological research on fear conditioning discussed earlier that suggests that danger frames can tap into biologically based emotional responses that alter how considerations are stored in long-term memory. When a person is exposed to a message framed in terms of danger or threat, the amygdala picks up on the fear cues imbedded in the frames and a fear response is initiated. Due to this arousal, the content of the message is more likely to be stored in the hippocampus as a long-term memory. In fact, that content gains strength as a piece of information relative to other considerations linked to or associated with the message topic due to the arousal of anxiety.

Danger frames may powerfully influence decision-making, but they are not deterministic. While the brain can detect a threat and create a response before we are consciously aware that the threat exists, it also possesses systems to help fine tune response so that we are not routinely overreacting to false threats. Thus, when a danger framed message is picked up by the brain and a fear response occurs, the amygdala will eventually gather input from other regions of the brain that can dampen fear arousal if the threat is determined to be non-imminent or particularly harmful.

Nevertheless, fear tactics and the danger frames they employ are significant because humans are biologically predisposed to look for danger cues and to react to them. Therefore, it can be difficult (though not impossible) for us to override these reactions, at least at the initial stage of information processing when we may be responding to danger frames before we can consciously process them, or when the danger frame is especially evocative. Danger frames may impact how we encode information via the affective route of information processing before we can rationally dismiss the actual threat we face.

My research tests hypotheses associated with the above theory on danger frames. However, before moving to a discussion of those hypotheses, I step back to consider what political psychology has to say about fear and judgment and to specifically address an element of affective intelligence that seems to contradict danger frame theory.

Political Psychology and the Affective Intelligence Model

Cognitive psychology research, though still exploring the affect-cognition relationship, has provided a great deal of evidence that emotions influences judgment. Research on network theories, which are cognitive models of memory and information processing, indicate that affect is an integral part of information processing and storage (Forgas 1999). For example, studies have shown that affect plays a role in recall from memory. People are more likely to recall information that was encoded in the same affect state as the recall affect (Bower 1981). Emotions can also influence how people encode information. We pay more attention to information that is congruent with our mood, attend to it longer, and link it to a “richer” associative network, thus making it’s recall more likely (Forgas 1999, 595). Affect also influences our interpretations of information when we have to fill in the gaps or extrapolate. We are more likely to produce interpretations of objects, events, or information that are consistent with our moods (Mayer, et al. 1992).

That affect influences attitude is now considered a forgone conclusion, but there is not yet consensus about the mechanisms behind that relationship. Political psychologists have developed and used various explanations and models on the role of emotions and political judgment such as cognitive appraisal theory, hot cognition and affective intelligence.

Cognitive appraisal theory posits that human emotion stems from an individual’s appraisal of her situation—how we interpret or think about a particular circumstance determines our emotional state (Lazarus 1966). More complex models of cognitive appraisal theory link various cognitive elements of subjective appraisals to the production of specific emotions (Smith & Ellsworth 1985). For example, in situations where an actor thinks she is wronged, is not at fault for the offense, and has control, her emotional response is more likely to be anger than fear.

Empirical research supports these sophisticated models of cognitive appraisal theory. Studies show that emotional reactions can be predicted by the subjective appraisals made just before said reactions (Scherer 1999). One of the most common criticisms of appraisal theory, however, is that it is too heavily dependent on cognitive processes. Though early proponents of the theory allowed that appraisals formed at lower levels of information processing—occurring below conscious awareness—are relevant to emotional reaction, most research in this area focuses on the cognition-to-emotion link (Scherer 1999), presumably because tools to measure pre-conscious appraisals are limited.

Research on cognitive appraisal theory also places appraisal before affect. Some scholarship in this area builds a recursive appraisal-to-affect-to-cognition component of the model (e.g. Lerner & Keltner 2000), but in these cases, it is the appraisal that is the explanatory variable. Danger frame theory reverses the relationship, explaining attitudes and cognitions in terms of the affect that is aroused.[[6]](#footnote-6) Cognitive appraisal theory, as of yet, can not be used to explain affect that occurs independent of cognition.

Lodge and Taber’s (2000) motivated reasoning model presented the concept of “hot cognition,” which describes the hypothesis that political concepts, once an individual is exposed to them, are attached to an affect (positive or negative) that is automatically aroused when the concept is later mentioned. Consistent with neurological research, even the emotion attached to a political concept is roused before the person is consciously aware of the concept. The affective charge is automatically recalled when said concept is brought to mind and biases conscious consideration of the matter. Therefore, affect automatically shapes how we judge politics such that, "(f)eelings become information." (2005, p. 456)

The theory of hot cognition is limited by the fact that it describes affect as one dimensional—consisting of a positive or negative valence—within its model of long-term memory. Students of affect and political judgment are moving to the conclusion that such a description is too limited and that, in fact, the influence of affect on attitude varies by type of emotion, not just valence (e.g. Huddy, Feldman, and Cassese, 2007).

Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen’s Affective Intelligence (2000) theory not only allows for affect to influence attitude independent of cognition, it puts affect in the driver’s seat, so to speak, of political judgment. According to Marcus et al., we depend on affect to guide even our automatic actions by providing us with judgments or evaluations of our environment and behavior that may not ever reach consciousness. The thoughts we express about a situation are interpretations of our feelings, not the origin of those feelings as cognitive appraisal theory holds.

At the heart of the affective intelligence model are dual emotional systems; the dispositional system and the surveillance system, both of which are tied to the limbic processes of the neurological system. The dual emotional system provides two alternative ways in which feelings guide political behavior or judgment. The disposition system (emotionality as trait) guides our habitual response, using previously learned associations—stored in procedural memory—to shape our present judgment. The surveillance system (emotionality as state) guides our response to new information under conditions of change or novelty. Though normative politics suggests we should always recalculate all considerations when at a decision node, acting by habit is cost effective in terms of cognitive or conscious resources. On the other hand, when one’s political circumstances, goals, or other aspects of the context change, it is better to rely on emotionality as state. Neither system relies on conscious thought, though cognitive processes can be called into play. Marcus et al. “conceptualize affect and reason as two complementary mental states in a delicate, interactive, highly functional dynamic balance.” (Marcus, et al. 2000, 8)

The affective intelligence model describes people as being generally habit driven in political thinking and behavior until anxiety motivates them to become engaged in the political process (perhaps for one specific issue, candidate or election). One of the most intriguing aspects of the affective intelligence model is its prediction that anxiety leads people to become more deliberate in their decision-making. According to Marcus et al., when the surveillance system is triggered, a person stops relying on habits and biases, and begins to seek out information useful to making judgments about the object or situation he has encountered. In effect, anxiety increases the likelihood that people will behave like the rational voter described by democratic theory.

There is support for this proposition in political science research. Brader (2005) examined how emotion cues effect response to televised campaign ads by exposing experiment subjects to ads on real candidates running in a local election. Brader compared those exposed to a negatively framed ad to subjects who saw the ad with fear cues added.[[7]](#footnote-7) The cues were non-verbal, consisting of music/noise and images.

Among other things, Brader hypothesized that fear cues would “motivate a search for information, decrease the salience of prior beliefs, and encourage reconsideration of choices on the basis of contemporary evaluations.” (p. 391) His data revealed that fear appeals made those exposed to negative ads more likely to recall related news and seek related information. Fear appeals also made subjects more likely to rely upon more contemporary information when evaluating candidates. Finally, Brader observed that adding fear cues to an ad led subjects to rely more on contemporary information and to ignore prior preferences. In sum, fear cues had a significant impact on subject behavior, leading them to be more vigilant about information and more likely to ignore prior beliefs in forming political evaluations. These findings are consistent with the affective intelligence model’s predictions.

Brader, along with Valentino & Suhay (2008), performed another test of the affective intelligence model in a study on the distinction between the effects of perception of threat and the effects of the emotion of anxiety on political attitudes and behavior. The authors’ goal was to disentangle the relationship between communication of threat and political behavior. The substantive issue they used was immigration policy because political communicaton on this topic often includes group threat cues, a type of threat that has been shown to be particularly effective at moving political attitudes.

The authors performed internet-based experiments where subjects viewed information about immigration and immigration policies and reported their attitudes afterward. The results of the experiments revealed that anxiety, more so than simple perception of threat, was the cause of attitude change among subjects. In other words, it was not so much the information and acceptance of it that influenced attitude, but the anxious reaction to the information that lead subjects to oppose immigration.

The authors also examined the mechanism for affect’s influence, comparing political psychology's (affective intelligence) theory on the relationship between affect and judgment and social psychology's (group-priming) theory. The group-priming theory (e.g. Mendelberg 2001) suggests that cues within information prime racial schema that come into play on the judgment while the affective intelligence model suggests that anxiety leads people to be more deliberative about the issue and rely less on automatic responses. The results supported the affective intelligence model over the group-priming explanation.

In sum, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) proposed that affect is good for political decision-making because anxiety will cause people to be more deliberative and less biased—less likely to rely on stereotypes—when forming political judgments. Brader (2005) observed that fear cues do, in fact, make people seek out relevant information and rely less on prior beliefs in forming judgments, and Brader, Valentino and Suhay (2008) found that it is anxiety (not just the perception of threat) and reflection (not just salience) that lead to attitude change.

If anxiety and fear make people more thoughtful when forming political judgments, what are the implications for political communication? Elite communication such as campaign ads, issue ads, fundraising emails, and citizen action emails often employ rhetoric and symbols to create a sense of urgency and anxiety among their target populations as a strategy to influence attitudes and behavior. The affective intelligence model seems to suggest that the use of such fear tactics actually backfires. Rather than making people buy into the elite message and taking the intended action, fear tactics may unintentionally encourage people to seek out more information and evaluate the issue in a more rational and less biased manner.

Such an implication flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Fear tactics and other anxiety arousing communication strategies are presumed to make people less thoughtful and prone to erroneous decision-making. Elites certainly seem to think that creating a sense of fear is a good strategy, as much of their communication reveals. Danger frame theory, introduced herein, and the literatures on which it rests—frame theory and neurological research—also suggest that fear tear tactics bias decision-making.

However, if the mechanisms underlying the affective intelligence model and those identified by danger frame theory are carefully explicated, one finds common ground. Specifically, it can be true that:

1. When danger is signaled and anxiety is aroused, the information that people acquire becomes privileged and has a powerful effect on political judgment relative to what it would have in the absence of fear and anxiety, as *danger frame theory* predicts.

*and*

1. When anxious, people will seek out information and make judgments based less on prior bias and more on new information, as the *affective intelligence model* predicts.

Both of these hypotheses can be correct, simultaneously, because they agree that anxiety increases the salience of *contemporary* information. The affective intelligence model says that anxiety leads to surveillance behavior and heightened attention. Danger frame theory suggests that the information gathered during that anxious state is encoded by the brain in a way that gives it privileged status and influence on judgment and attitude. Prior habits of thought and biases fade in this context because the information acquired under conditions of anxiety is weighted more heavily than previously held preferences in the judgment equation.

This is exactly the conclusion made by Brader (2005), when he observed that fear cues in political ads made people seek out and rely on contemporary information over prior attitudes when forming political judgments. Marcus and colleagues (2005) also found similar results in an experimental study of anxiety and political tolerance judgments.

Essentially, there is no real contradiction between the affective intelligence model and danger frame theory. That a contradiction might be perceived has more to do with how Marcus et al. (2000) couched their model in opposition to the rational choice paradigm of political science. The authors seemed intent on revising the perception of affect as the spoiler of thoughtful political judgment, and thus a corrupting force in democratic government, by making the argument that affect reduces bias and promotes more rational decision-making among the masses.[[8]](#footnote-8) That anxiety leads people to seek out new information does not necessarily imply more rational political judgment, however. These information seekers may end up acquiring new biases depending on the content and quality of the information they acquire.

**Conclusion**

I have presented a theory on danger frames, which I define as the as the fear cues used in political communication that is designed to arouse anxiety and a sense of threat, and are commonly referred to as fear tactics. This theory is based on the broader literature on frame theory and incorporates neurological research on fear conditioning to describe the specific, and possibly distinct, mechanisms by which danger frames influence political opinion formation.

Danger frame theory holds that fear cues (including images, sounds, and text) attached to elite messages can interact with the brain’s response to fear arousal so as to privilege the information contained in such messages. Danger frames are intended to induce anxiety within a message recipient, which stimulates a fear response by the brain’s amygdala that encourages storage of the message content in the hippocampus as a strong and enduring memory or consideration. Consequently, judgments regarding the message topic will be disproportionately influenced by the information conveyed in said message.

Danger frame theory is consistent with models of affect and cognition that allow emotions to influence attitude independent of cognition. It pertains specifically to the effect of fear on opinion formation, and thus is consistent with research suggesting that different emotions have varying effects on political attitude.

Having developed a theory of danger frames, the next step in this project is to test hypotheses drawn from the theory. I will explore questions of whether danger frames induce anxiety and fear among message recipients, as measured by self-report and physiological indicators, and whether they bias political attitudes in a manner that is biologically determined.

Footnotes

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1. While elites may try to influence one another through mass communication, the intent of such communication is mainly to move public attitudes, which may indirectly influence other elites. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are a fair number of books and articles on fear tactics as political strategy (e.g. The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate [Griffith 1970, 1987]). Most of these works are sociological or historical case studies centering on specific people, policies (e.g. Crime or terrorism), or places (e.g. Iran). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A common example concerns the debate over abortion policy. Those who support government protection of abortion tend to frame it as a matter of “choice” (Pro-Choice) to emphasize the perspective of a woman who is faced with an unplanned pregnancy, and the rights she should have. Those who oppose abortion protection tend to frame the issue as a matter of “life or death” (Pro-Life), emphasizing the well-being of an unborn fetus, and the rights it should have. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also Druckman & McDermott (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I do not claim, however, that danger frames are the only category of frames that operate primarily via affect. It is easily conceivable that other emotions may be targeted by framing strategies, but it is beyond the scope of this project explore this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Psychologists have been studying the interaction between affect and cognition for as far back as the field has existed. Primacy has been a major part of the debate: What comes first, the thought or the feeling? Which is more influential on behavior and attitude? (Lazarus 1999) Identifying the distinction between cognition and affect is itself a complicated effort, and the border has not been made clearer with time. Some political psychology studies assume or hypothesize that cognition shapes emotion, while others posit that affect shapes cognition. Marcus (2000) suggests that semantics may contribute to the debate (p. 224), but there still remains disagreement between the two camps. It is well beyond the scope of this project to resolve the debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brader (2005) also tested hypotheses regarding the effect of enthusiasm cues. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This tone is also apparent in Marcus, et al. 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)